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King County Charter review includes chance for citizens to have an impact

By Mike Lowry and Lois North
Special to The Times

In 1968, when voters adopted the King County Charter, we were young



Lois North



Mike Lowry

Get involved

The King County Charter Review Commission is accepting comments on its proposed charter amendments through April 21.

The recommendations and public hearing schedule are available at

www.kingcounty.gov/exec/charter.aspx

The first hearing is at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday in the Emerald Room of The Hall at Fauntleroy, 9131 California Ave. S.W., Seattle.

Comments may also be e-mailed to charter.review@kingcounty.gov

adults enamored with the governmental and political processes and full of energy to change the world for the better.

While the Vietnam War dominated national politics, a series of local scandals led to reforms in King County government to prevent corruption and increase efficiencies.

The reforms included creation of the state's first "home rule" charter (or constitution), giving residents more control over their government. With voter approval, the charter took effect May 1, 1969.

Forty years later, we're retired from our political careers, but still enamored with good government and honored to be asked to continue our public service as co-chairs of the once-a-decade review and update of the King County Charter.

While the county and region have grown and seen changes and challenges never imagined, the charter has withstood the test of time with little change by the people during three previous 10-year reviews. It has provided a sound structure for our county government.

As former elected leaders, we realize the importance of citizen involvement in shaping how our government operates. That's why we've been careful to include public review every step of the way as the Charter Review Commission developed draft proposed changes to the charter. It's democracy in action and gives people the power to ensure that the values we have outlined in our original charter still ring true today.

The 21-member commission has conducted extensive public outreach during its yearlong effort to find out what is working with our charter, and what is not.

Now we invite citizens to give us their thoughts on our recommendations pertaining to an array of county governance issues. The commission will transmit its final charter amendment recommendations to the Metropolitan King County Council next month. Amendments passed by the council will then appear on a future ballot for voter approval.

King County has undergone enormous transformation over its 50-year history. It has evolved from a rural to an urban county, and international trade and technology have replaced farming and logging as the county's economic base. Relatively few King County residents live in rural areas today, while suburban cities are numerous and growing at a rapid pace, presenting new challenges such as growth management.

The King County merger with Metro in the early 1990s was probably the most significant change since the charter was adopted, and it created new regional responsibilities for the county, such as transit and water quality. Regional committees were established in the charter to provide a forum for the county and cities to work together on these issues. The commission this year is recommending changes to the regional committees, including reducing the number of council members on them and modifying the authority of the panels and their non-council members.

As the number of suburban cities has more than tripled and unincorporated areas of the county have been annexed, the county's role as a local government has shrunk. In 2004, motivated in part by this reduction in the county's local role, citizens initiated and passed a charter amendment decreasing the size of the Metropolitan King County Council to 9 members from 13.

While our charter did not allow for citizen initiatives, a court challenge resulted in the state Supreme Court ruling that citizens could amend the charter with initiatives. The previous Charter Review Commission recommended this change in 1998. This year, the commission formalizes in the charter the Supreme Court's decision.

As King County becomes more of a regional and rural entity, we must maintain a focus on rural interests. This year, the commission is suggesting that a new high-level position within the county executive's office be created to represent the interests of rural and urban-unincorporated-area residents.

For the citizens of King County, we are in the homestretch of this once-per-decade opportunity to weigh in on our charter and comment on what changes you think your county government needs to make to improve our quality of life. We urge you to get involved at public hearings or by commenting through our Web site. We're ready to listen to the voice of the people. When complete, we urge the County Council to seriously consider placing these amendments on an upcoming ballot.

Mike Lowry is a former Washington governor, U.S. representative and member of the Metropolitan King County Council. Lois North is a former state representative and senator and member of the Metropolitan King County Council. They co-chair the Charter Review Commission.

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